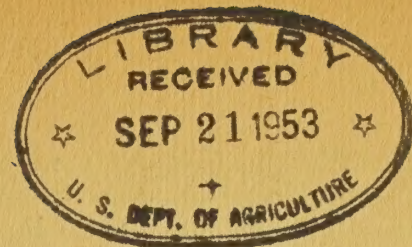


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Paul D. Gilbert
Speech at Meeting of
American Home Economics Association
Kansas City, Missouri, June 25, 1953

Subject: MEN'S WEAR IS IMPORTANT

Ladies and Gentlemen: I am honored to be here today and to speak to you as a men's wear merchant. It could be that the invitation was extended to me as a more or less typical retailer of men's apparel, coming from a medium size, centrally located American city. Typical merchants are always salesmen. My sales message is on the importance of men's clothing. I will try to show you that men's clothing is more important in many ways other than merely a covering for the body. I will try to show and sell you on the idea that men's clothing is important socially; in business; in the family budget and that it touches materially every aspect of our individual, family and national life.

There is probably no group in America I would rather discuss this subject with, than professional home economists, because I feel that I am among friends with whom I share many common objectives. Mrs. Bond put it well in the May issue of the Journal of Home Economics, when she pointed up the value of an "Alliance between business and the consumer with education as the catalytic agent."

This alliance is more than a surface relationship. For example, I have watched with great interest your program to encourage informative labeling and informative advertising, to establish standards of quality and identity, to prohibit fraudulent sales practices, and otherwise to increase the standards of retail clothing.

Any reputable merchant will applaud you when you seek to promote integrity in advertising and merchandising. And by the same token, it seems to me that those who seek to mislead consumers are your natural enemies and are violating the very precepts you try so hard to inculcate in our young people.

I am sorry that our own South Bend home economics director could not be at this convention. Her clothing program in our city is paying real dividends in consumer education. Not only in the regular curriculum, but also in the field of adult education. In one sense, it surprises me too. It surprises me that, in these days when adult education is competing with television, square dancing and third dimension movies, so many people are interested in an educational program where fabrics and fashions instead of popcorn and polaroids are the featured attractions.

Your work is helping to make us a country of intelligent buyers. To me, that means real achievement and the net result is a better community and happier people. But, specifically, from the businessman's

standpoint, I recognize that the broader and more intensive your educational program, the sounder is the basis for the retailer's program. In the long run, this means better service, better competition and better business because we deal with selective consumers.

It is with some hesitation that I use statistics with such a well informed audience. You are undoubtedly acquainted with the Department of Commerce figures which show that approximately seven percent of the consumer dollar goes into apparel. It is this figure that makes textiles and apparel of real economic importance in the home economics field.

Of the seven percent the American family spends for apparel, approximately four percent goes for women's wear, and one-half of that figure goes for men's wear--about 2%. From the viewpoint of the family budget then, professional home economists and teachers of this important subject should devote half as much attention, time and study to men's wear as they do to women's wear. My guess is that this situation does not exist. Maybe it is natural for more attention to be paid to women's wear. Ladies can make their own clothes. Style changes in women's wear are faster than in men's wear. And then the women's wear manufacturers and retailers have always been far, far ahead of us when it comes to appealing to their consumers. As a result, the poor male of the family usually gets what's left of the clothing budget after the ladies' wants are satisfied. But even these and other considerations do not excuse the facts, as I find them, that home economists practically ignore men's wear in their studies and teachings. Let me repeat: From the viewpoint of the family budget, the apparel for the male deserves at least half the attention given by your profession to the distaff side.

Here is an interesting fact often overlooked. We have heard so much talk of a discouraging nature that the men's wear industry is slipping; that it is getting less and less of the consumer dollar; that five years ago the average man only bought one-half of a suit a year and now he is buying about one-third of a suit a year--in other words, the average man did buy one suit every two years and now he waits almost three years. The important thing so often overlooked is that the downward trend in men's wear has been duplicated in women's apparel.

Twenty years ago, women's wear was getting twice as much of the consumer spendable dollar as it is getting today. The same is true of men's apparel--no better and no worse. The down trend has effected all apparel.

Why this has happened is a question where your guess is as good as mine. Possibly apparel is being made better; maybe consumers, thanks to the work of the home economists, are better apparel buyers; maybe Mr. and Mrs. America are taking better care of their clothes; maybe the trend to casual living has caused the consumer to wear apparel that is less expensive. Maybe the dress standards of America have fallen, and when we observe some of the high school students with their dungarees, their carefully soiled white shoes and their purposely torn shirts, we reach the conclusion that might be the answer. Lil Abner has not been a particularly good influence in American dress habits and Dogpatch has become a popular community.

A more logical answer is that in the competition for the consumer dollar, other industries have made themselves more attractive. Those industries which are based on temporary pleasure have gotten, during the past twenty years, a greater and greater slice of the consumer dollar. More money is spent on cigarettes than on apparel. More money is spent on movies than on both men's and women's clothing even in this television age. Dollarwise the American public is eating better, drinking better, driving better cars, furnishing their homes better--and dressing worse. Because this might be the answer so far as men's wear is concerned, is all the more reason why I should try to convince you to teach and spread the word that men's clothing is important.

A very important study made by our friends the U. S. Department of Agriculture several years ago disclosed that men do not buy clothing just for body covering. The real reason men buy clothes according to this study--with which I fully agree--is in this order: To impress fellow workers and get better jobs; to maintain and improve social position in the community; to win or hold a woman.

Clothes make the man. During the depths of the depression I had the good fortune of proving that fact. In the early 1930's you may remember the days of the breadlines and the apple sellers on the corners. Naturally men's wear stores were hard hit for lack of customers. Patched pants in those days were the usual, not the unusual. Individually and nationally we were financially and mentally depressed. Something had to be done to improve the dress habits as well as the thinking of our individuals. It was then that I concocted an advertising campaign which we called "P. A."--the initials for "Personal Appearance". The subsidiary keynote was the old line "Dress well and succeed." This program worked like a charm in revitalizing my own business. I franchised newspapers all over the country to use this campaign and men's wear stores from all over reported that it stimulated a new interest in dressing well. More important is the fact that we convinced hundreds of thousands of men that we gave them new hope and helped a little, I believe, to bring them out of a psychological depression. The men who recognized the importance of personal appearance, dressed well to succeed and did succeed.

In this connection, it is interesting to me how we take style cues from our leaders or from popular figures. You people who devote your life to teaching, of course, can identify this as a behaviour pattern based on the sound principle that we often imitate what we like, respect or admire.

For example, I noticed as I walked in today that a number of the ladies were wearing "bangs" and our friends in the beauty culture business tell us that there has been a big trend in that particular hair style because of Mrs. Eisenhower. This is just as normal, it seems to me, as the fact that more people than ever before are beginning to play golf because our President is a golfer.

I venture to say the President also is going to have considerable influence on the clothing industry--in fact, it can already be felt. His "Eisenhower jacket", you will recall, was an innovation in military clothing that was even adopted by the United States Marines, who usually like to originate their own ideas, rather than copy others.

President Eisenhower is a superbly well-dressed man. He wears conservative suits, well-tailored, favoring for color what we might call "inconspicuous quiet tones." His neckties have simple patterns, designed not to stand out, but to blend with the rest of his attire.

This is easily analyzed by either a retail merchant or a textile teacher. In the President's case, he depends a great deal on projecting his personality to huge audiences of people. To do this, he relies mainly on his face, his hands and his voice. To him, facial expression is a tremendous stock in trade. For these reasons, his clothes need to be of the style, cut and color that they leave no impression whatsoever on the audience. If you notice anything at all about the President's attire, you simply acknowledge that it was excellent, but you forget what it was. For some people, I would recommend bow ties, button-down collars or other ornamentation of dress--but for him, an "Ike-suit" not a "zoot-suit".

I predict that the President's wearing apparel will have a gradual but very obvious effect on the kind of clothing men buy in the next few years. We can expect more and more male customers to demand a combination of quality material, conservative tailoring and fewer prints in favor of quiet, harmonious shades.

It is true that the well dressed man is impressive. He feels confident. He inspires confidence. He is a better business man. It is definitely true that the breadwinner who is well dressed becomes the cake winner. To be successful in business or as a farmer or as a mechanic, or as a teacher, you must have pride in yourself. You must reflect your personality to others. The fastest easiest way is to have pride of personal appearance.

Does the consumer get his money's worth when he buys men's clothing? I know that is a question bothering home economists and laymen consumers alike. To my knowledge, men's clothing prices have never been and never can be out of line. They cannot be because there is far too much competition; there is too much available supply at all levels of the trade.

Here is proof of that statement. About three years ago raw wool prices got out of hand. As you know, good apparel wool comes from Australia and our price controls never had any effect on the foreign wool auctions. I recall a speech in February three years ago at a national clothiers convention where a spokesman for the wool industry said that because of these high wool prices the price for men's summer suits would be doubled. It didn't happen. It couldn't happen. What happened was, that spurred by the fantastic wool prices, synthetics came into the

picture with a bang. In the following summer season, men's suits were made of man made fibers and were lower priced, on the average, than the year before. Wool has since come off its high price horse.

I do not know of a keener competitive trade than that of the men's wear industry--which is all to the protection of the consumer and an effective brake on any improper prices. At the fiber level the synthetics and the blends and the miracle fibers are waging a "battle of the fibers" competing for your favor and your dollar. At the mill level where the fibers are made into cloth, the situation is strongly competitive with a big battle now going on between the Northern mills and the Southern mills. When we get to the clothing manufacturers, and by clothing I mean suits and outercoats only, it is astounding that there are well over two thousand different manufacturing plants.

And that competition is nothing to that at the retail level. The last census reported approximately 27,000 stores selling only men's and boy's clothing and furnishings. But on top of that we must add family clothing stores, variety stores, department stores, mail order houses, supermarkets and even drug stores selling men's pants. The National Association of Retail Clothiers and Furnishers has estimated that over 75,000 different retail outlets are selling men's apparel. With that keen competition, certainly the consumer does not have to worry about exorbitant prices.

Now look at the figures. They show conclusively that men's clothing is a good buy--and has been consistently. The Bureau of Labor Statistics cost of living indexes show that the cost of living was slightly under a 100% of doubling the 1939 figure. All apparel maintained the same proportion. However, men's wear alone, statistics show, kept about 10% below the pace of other apparel.

Generally speaking, if the overall cost of living goes up, men's wear will keep a normal pace--never more--and usually slightly less than the average. If you remember the price picture, food was the main factor in this increase, with clothing behind and rent way behind. Recent figures indicate food dropping back; rents increasing strongly; and apparel tending away from decreases in price which have been evident for nearly a year.

In all frankness, next Fall we will have a slight price problem in men's apparel. The clothing manufacturers are almost 100% unionized and, recently, the workers gained their first wage increase in three years. This was about a 10% increase. Because we retailers buy long in advance, this added cost in making men's apparel is not yet reflected on the retail counters. It will be next Fall before this increase is felt. However, I do not think the full amount of the increase will be passed on to the consumer. The keen competition which I talked of will make manufacturer and retailer soften the impact to the consumer by absorbing parts of this

wage raise to the factory workers. Next Fall, clothing prices may average two and half to five dollars a suit more than last year--which will still be less than the prices we had to charge during and immediately after the war.

I have said that men's clothes are important. I am not alone in that thinking. For years we in the men's wear business have shed bitter tears that women's wear gets such tremendous publicity, and the only time that any one mentions masculine apparel in newspapers or magazines was to poke fun and treat ridiculously some foppish eccentric idea. That is not true any more. Men's wear today is news, being treated respectfully by leading publications all over the country. How many of you saw the May issue of the famous Vogue magazine? For the first time, this women's high fashion publication had a man's suit on the cover and devoted sixteen pages on the inside to the subject of dressing the male fashionably and properly. This is just part of the growing men's wear publicity. Today there are fifteen national magazines devoting regular space to men's wear. Women's magazines--such as Good Housekeeping and the publications distributed through the chain food stores--are telling the housewives all about proper men's apparel. Over six hundred newspapers throughout the country are regularly printing news items and factual statements in a serious vein about the merchandise I sell.

Part of this recognition of consumer interest is because men's wear has more to talk about than ever before. Never before has there been so much genuinely new about men's wear. The fibers, the fabrics, the new, more colorful items, the comfortable sportswear catering to the leisure manner of American living today, are all just parts of the newsworthiness of men's wear today. I am not a chemist, so I will not discuss the so-called miracle fabrics which are at the top of the list of consumer interest. I know that you are being asked many questions concerning these from your students, your clientele and the people you advise. You know better than I how the consumer imagination has been captured by the promises of these sensational new fabrics.

With this first hand impact upon you as professional home economists, you must now agree with me that men's clothes are important. As you recognize that, you must know that yours is a responsibility to know the facts of men's clothes, to teach those facts, and to use your widespread influence to have the American man dress better. Part of your job is to improve the standard of living. That includes the standards of apparel living, for the man as well as the woman.

You can be sure that the retailers of America stand ready, anxious and willing to help.

Thank you.